

Handy Hints and Tips

Browning Onions Easily

If you are browning onions in a skillet and it seems to be taking forever, sprinkle a dash, (1/4 teaspoon) of sugar over the onions, which will speed up the browning process

Unclog your shakers

If your salt or pepper shakers keep clogging up, add a few grains of uncooked rice to them. The rice will absorb the moisture that causes the salt and pepper to clump. Dried peas will work just the same. If you have shakers that aren't see-through, having the peas or rice in the shakers will alert you when it's getting near the time to refill. They will start to rattle

Alternative to Alcohol

Alcohol is an optional ingredient in many recipes and gives a distinctive flavor. But, if you prefer, you can substitute stock in most savory dishes and fruit juice in most sweet recipes

Avocado Touch Test

To test whether an avocado is ripe, flick off the small stalk at the end. If it comes off easily, the fruit is ripe. Alternatively, cradle the avocado in the palm of your hand and apply gentle pressure to the stem end. If the avocado yields to slight pressure, it is ripe and ready to eat.

Baked Cheesecake

Baked cheesecakes shrink and crack when overcooked. At the end of cooking the cheesecake will probably be soft in the centre but will firm after cooling. When the baking time is completed, turn oven off, leave the door ajar and allow the cheesecake to cool in the oven.

Better Dressing

A salad dressing made in a blender or food processor will not separate as quickly as one which is simply shaken in a glass jar.

Browning Meat

When browning cubes of meat (or mince) for a casserole, sear meat in a hot pan in small quantities, stirring, over high heat until well browned all over. This will give the dish a rich color and flavor.

Capsicum Skins

To peel grilled or roasted capsicums, cover them with a damp tea towel. They will cool quickly and the skins will come off easily.

Cheap Piping Bag

A small, strong plastic bag (like a "clip lock") makes an excellent piping bag and is especially useful for drizzling chocolate. Fill the bag with slightly cooled melted chocolate, twist top tightly then cut a tiny hole in one corner. Discard the bag when you have finished.

Cheese-Freeze

Parmesan cheese can be stored in an airtight container in the freezer. It never freezes solid, so it can be grated as soon as you take it from the freezer.

Citrus Peel

Use a zester to make citrus shreds. They are great for decorating cakes and desserts, especially when simmered beforehand in sugar syrup.

Cooking Greens

Leafy greens, such as spinach and silver beet, don't need to be cooked in water. Wash leaves shake off excess water and cook in a covered pan or in a microwave oven until just wilted.

Cook's Clean-Up

After removing a floury mix from a bowl (especially scone dough), soak bowl immediately in cold water. Warm or hot water makes it even more. "Dry-clean" your hands by rubbing a small amount of flour over your fingers and palms.

Crisp or Puffy Pastry

For crisp pastry, place a cold filling, such as cooked sliced apples, into a cold pastry case. An exception

would be a puff pastry topping on a meat pie - place the pastry over a hot filling to maximize "puff".

Crunchy Meat Crackling

To make crunchy meat crackling, cook the rind separately from the meat. Cut the rind from the meat with a small, sharp knife and place it in a shallow baking dish; brush rind with one tablespoon of vegetable oil and rub with one tablespoon of coarse cooking salt. Bake, uncovered, in a very hot oven for about 40 minutes or until rind browns and crackles. Drain on absorbent paper.

Decorative Chocolate Curls

Run a vegetable peeler along the edge of a block of chocolate to create quick decorative curls for desserts and cakes.

De Veining Prawns

The quickest and neatest way to de vein an uncooked prawn is to insert a fine skewer just behind the head, using it to carefully draw out the vein in one piece.

Easy Shaved Parmesan

To make parmesan flakes for pasta and salads, use a vegetable peeler to slice thin shavings off a block of cheese

Good as New Honey

Pure honey easily crystallizes or candies. To re liquefy honey, stand the jar, uncovered, in hot water, stirring occasionally until smooth. Or place the uncovered jar in the microwave oven on medium (80 percent power) for about 20 seconds.

Handling Cooking Oil

Warm oil over a low heat before brushing it on food for grilling or barbecuing. Heating thins the oil so you will use less. Transfer oil from a large container into a pull-top water bottle or squeezable sauce bottle. This makes it easier to pour a small amount of oil into a measuring spoon or pan.

Herbs, Dried or Fresh

Remember, one teaspoon of dried herbs equals one tablespoon of chopped fresh herbs.

Juicy Barbequed Meats

When pan-frying, grilling or barbecuing meat, fish or poultry, turn it only once. Repeated turning will dry out the flesh.

Keep Cooked Rice

Don't waste leftover rice - it can be frozen for later use in patties, fried rice and other dishes.

Keeping Fresh Herbs

Keep herbs fresh by placing stems in a jug with a few centimeters of water; cover tops with a plastic bag; tie bag in place and refrigerate.

Keeping Ripe Bananas

There's no need to waste an oversupply of ripe bananas. You can freeze bananas, unpeeled, sealed in an airtight container or freezer bag. Simply thaw before mashing for use in banana cakes or muffins.

Level a Baked Cake

To level the top of a cooled cake, first return it to the cake pan. Then place a large serrated knife flat against the top of the pan and saw the blade across the cake's surface, using the edge of the pan as a guide to top neatly.

Light Pastry

It's best to make pastry in cool weather. Have the butter and water chilled. Handle the pastry quickly, lightly and as little as possible.

Low-Fat Veggies

Cut down on fat by grilling or barbecuing zucchini instead of frying them. Brush lightly with oil or mist with cooking oil spray before grilling.

Low-Joule Recipes

Instead of sour cream, try using low-fat plain yogurt in savory recipes. Remove pan from heat and let it stand for a few minutes before stirring in the yogurt.

Make Herb Vinegar

Make your own herb vinegars. Wash and dry fresh herbs and place in sterilized bottles. Add enough white wine vinegar to fill bottle, then seal tightly. Keep refrigerated for up to two months.

Make Self-Raising Flour

To convert plain flour into self-raising flour, add two teaspoons of baking powder to each cup of plain flour. Adding one teaspoon of cream of tartar and half a teaspoon of bicarbonate, of soda to one cup of plain flour gives the same result.

Measuring Syrup and Honey

Prevent syrups and honey sticking to your measuring spoon by running the spoon under hot water before using it.

Mess-Free Fruit Baking

Use a large (Texas) muffin pan when baking whole apples, peaches and pears to contain the liquid content of the fruit. Keep the fruit upright to ensure that it cooks evenly.

No-Waste Tomato Paste

To prevent mould forming on top of your tomato paste, pour a thin film of oil over the surface of the paste to stop air reaching the surface. Alternatively, freeze paste in level-tablespoon portions in ice-cube trays. When the paste is frozen, transfer to a bag and seal tightly.

Oil-Free Cooking

Try using stock rather than oil when stir-frying.

Onions without Tears

To minimize tears while preparing onions, freeze them for 10 minutes or refrigerate for one hour before chopping - or try chopping them under a strong extractor fan

Peeling Kiwi Fruit

To peel Kiwi Fruit, slice off both ends and use a dessertspoon to push the flesh from the skin.

Perfect Pastry

Allow pastry to "rest", wrapped in plastic in the refrigerator for about 30 minutes before and after rolling. This helps relax the gluten (protein) in the flour and avoids shrinkage during baking.

Preparing Anchovies

If you dislike the saltiness of anchovies, soak them in enough milk to cover for about 20 minutes. Drain and rinse before using.

Scorch-Proof Skewers

To stop bamboo skewers from scorching and splintering, soak them in water for one hour before use. If using a marinade high in sugar or honey, thread meat after marinating.

Shell Nuts

Remove the brown, paper-like skins from hazelnuts by toasting them in a moderate oven for five to 10 minutes or until the skins begin to split. Wrap them in a tea towel and rub well to dislodge skins.

Short Crust Pastry

A food processor makes great short crust pastry, but take care not to over process. Use short, quick bursts of power when blending butter into flour. Use only enough water to make ingredients cling together; too much water causes shrinkage.

Skimming Fat

Soups, stocks and casseroles should be made a day ahead and refrigerated. The fat will rise to the surface and solidify, making it easy to remove.

Skinning Fish or Chicken

To remove the skin from fish or chicken, dip your fingers in salt give you a good grip.

Testing a Cake

To accurately test whether a cake is finished baking, insert a skewer into a smooth part of its top, close to the centre of the cake - never through a crack in the surface.

Thinly Sliced Meats

To cut raw meat or poultry in paper-thin slices, first cover the food in plastic wrap and partially freeze it. Remove from freezer, unwrap, and it will slice easily.

Using Phyllo Pastry

To stop phyllo drying out and cracking while you are working with it, cover pastry in a sheet of plastic wrap then in a damp tea towel.